DS-252

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name: Land Breaking of tame grass/alfalfa (former conservation reserve program acreage) for conversion to dryland agriculture. State of Montana Lease Number 4478.	Proposed Implementation Date: Spring 2014
Proponent: Curt Flakne, 305 S Washington, Plentywood, Montana 59254	
Type and Purpose of Action: Surface lessee, Curt Flakne, has made a written request for breaking of tame grass/alfalfa on former conservation reserve program acreage to the Glasgow Unit Office of the Department of Natural Resources & Conservation. The surface lessee has requested permission to break an estimated 319.1 acres of tall wheatgrass smooth brome grass and alfalfa formerly enrolled in the conservation reserve program. The land breaking would be a conversion from present use of tame grass/alfalfa to dryland agriculture for the purpose of growing small grain or pulse crops. The acreage would be reclassified from former conservation reserve program acreage to dryland agriculture for small grain or pulse crop production.	
Location: All, Section 36 Township 35 North Range 52 East	County: Sheridan

I. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED: Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.	Curt Flakne the surface lessee has made a request to break 319.1 acres (more or less) of tall wheatgrass; smooth brome grass and alfalfa, formerly conservation reserve program acreage on State land Lease Number 4478. The request was sent to the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Glasgow Unit Office for review and evaluation. The request will be reviewed per Department of Natural Resources and Conservation land breaking criteria for all lands other than native sod. The Glasgow Unit Office contacted the following government agency for comments: Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, Region 6.
2. OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED:	The other government agencies that may have jurisdiction for this project are the United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Service Agency and United States Department of Agriculture, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Service.
3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:	No Action Alternative: Deny permission to Curt Flakne to break 319.1 acres of former tame grass/alfalfa acreage. Under the no action alternative this acreage would be classified as dryland hay production. Action Alternative: Grant permission to Curt Flakne to break 319.1 acres of tame grass/alfalfa acreage. The new land use will be dryland agriculture to produce small grain & pulse crops.

II. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

RESOURCE	POTENTIAL IMPACTS
4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE: Are fragile, compactible or unstable soils present? Are there unusual geologic features? Are there special reclamation considerations?	No Action Alternative: The soils on the State land will remain the same and continue to produce tame grass/alfalfa vegetation. The area will continue to produce vegetation. Action Alternative: This type of project will impact the soils that are currently producing tame grass/alfalfa vegetation. The soils will be broken up for the purpose of producing dryland small grain and pulse crops. The soil type that will be broken for dryland agriculture is: Williams-Zahill loam, gently rolling, 4 to 8 percent slopes. The Williams-Zahill loam, gently rolling is suitable for dryland agriculture. This soil type has moderate hazards to wind and water erosion. Williams-Zahill loam, undulating, 0 to 4 percent slopes. The Williams-Zahill undulating loam has moderate hazards to wind or water erosion. Williams loam undulating 0 to 4 percent slopes. The Williams loam undulating soil type has minimal hazards of water and wind erosion. Curt Flakne will mitigate impacts for the hazards of wind and water erosion. Curt Flakne's management practices are continuous cropping and chemical fallow. The onsite inspection of this tract showed no salinity present in the topsoil profile. The 319.1 acres requested for breaking will maintain current soil qualities and soil stability under dryland agriculture management. Mitigation: There will be areas of tract that will be flagged by Departmental personnel and left in permanent vegetative cover. Curt Flakne plans to continuous crop or chemical fallow this acreage. The annual standing stubble will mitigate the majority of soil loss from wind or water erosion.
5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION: Are important surface or groundwater resources present? Is there potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality?	No Action Alternative: Under this alternative annual precipitation will be utilized by the tame grass/alfalfa plant community. There will be no impacts to water quality, quantity and distribution. Action Alternative: The project will allow Curt Flakne to expand his dryland agriculture small grain and pulse crop production. The land breaking for small grain and pulse crops will not use water resources, other than the water associated with the topsoil from annual precipitation.
6. AIR QUALITY: Will pollutants or	No Action Alternative: No impacts will occur to

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particulate be produced? Is the project influenced by air quality regulations or zones (Class I airshed)?	air quality under this alternative. Action Alternative: The breaking of the tame grass/alfalfa acreage for dryland agriculture purposes will have no impacts to the air quality of the State land.
7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY: Will vegetative communities be permanently altered? Are any rare plants or cover types present?	No Action Alternative: Under this alternative the current tame grass/alfalfa plant community will remain intact. Action Alternative: The breaking of the tame grass/alfalfa plant community will permanently destroy the current plant community on the project area. The tame grass/alfalfa community consists of tall wheatgrass, smooth brome grass and alfalfa. The former conservation reserve program acreage contains no known rare plant species. This plant community is currently tame grass/alfalfa.
8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS: Is there substantial use of the area by important wildlife, birds or fish?	No Action Alternative: The habitat types associated with a tame grass/alfalfa plant community will remain intact. Action Alternative: This type of activity will disturb the habitat types on the State land. The area of impact is a tall wheatgrass, smooth brome grass and alfalfa plant community. This type of tame grass/alfalfa plant community has some habitat resources. There will be impacts to the wildlife and upland bird resources associated with the State land. There will be some areas of tract that will continue to produce native grass plants. These areas consist on hills and associated drainages. The remaining native rangeland plant community will provide various types of habitat resources for song birds, upland game birds, whitetail deer and mule deer. Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks were asked for their comments concerning this proposal. Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks comments are as follows: "Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the request to break 319.1 acres of expired CRP on State Lease #4478. A site visit revealed the habitat stand on the lease consists of predominately smooth brome, intermediate wheatgrass, tall wheatgrass, alfalfa and small amounts of crested wheatgrass. The overall impression is that the habitat stand is fairly diverse with good wildlife cover. As described the lease is a dryland CRP tract with various wooded drainages running through the property. Surrounding landscape is a combination of native rangelands, small grain production and CRP ground. Although wildlife use is also difficult to determine at this time, the lease more than likely is utilized by pheasant, sharp-tail grouse, partridge and non-game species and is within an area historically used

II. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
	by wintering mule deer herds. Mule deer were observed using the CRP and associated wooded drainages during the site visit. MFWP is aware of the difficulty that landowners are having when trying to re-enroll their CRP. MFWP would like to see an attempt to re-enroll into a higher Conservation Reserve Practice such as CP2 or CP25 if that attempt was not made and if the opportunity allows. Without knowing whether there will be a 2014 general sign up, the MFWP would still like to make aware the possibility enroll the land into a CRP program and the MFWP does offer a cost sharing opportunity, through our Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program, in the form of a "Seed Cost Share". This program is for landowners that plan to enroll in CRP with a higher conservation practice seed mix, such as CP2 and a CP25 native grass mixture to increase the chance of re-enrolling the CRP and help off-set those additional costs. This also applies to those lands that are currently in small grain production but want to enroll in CRP. As you know, CRP that has been newly planted to formerly cropped fields can be some of the most productive stands. In addition to the CRP seed-cost share, the MFWP, through the Upland Game Bird Enhancement program, can also share on rest-rotation grazing management plans. If breaking were granted on the described lands for small grain production, MFWP appreciates the reassurance that all environmentally sensitive drainages will be left in permanent vegetation and recommends at least a 100 meter buffer around any drainage or sensitive area that run through the lease and any seasonal wetlands for reptile and amphibian use, upland game bird nesting cover, as well as for filtering pollutant runoff and limiting top soil erosion. If the new lessee is interested in more information regarding MFWP programs they can contact our regional office in Glasgow or Plentywood area biologist Ryan Williamson at 406-895-2468. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this matter, MFWP would appreciate a notification of the final outcome of the break request". Mark G. Sullivan R6 Program Manager.
9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES: Are any federally listed threatened or endangered species or identified habitat present? Any wetlands? Sensitive Species or Species of special concern?	No Action Alternative: Under this alternative there will be no change to the current environmental resources of tame grass/alfalfa pasture lands. Action Alternative: The project area contains no known unique, endangered, fragile or limited environmental resources. The project area consists of flat to gently rolling terrain, with tall wheatgrass, smooth brome grass and alfalfa vegetation. There are areas of native

II. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	
	rangeland located on portions of this section. The native rangeland sites will see no impacts from the land breaking process. All drainages will be left intact for water runoff erosion control.
10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES: Are any historical, archaeological or paleontological resources present?	No Action Alternative: The project area has no known historical or archaeological sites and existing status would remain. Action Alternative: There are no known historical or archaeological sites on the project area that will be impacted. The project area was inspected by Randy Dirkson, Land Use Specialist from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Glasgow Unit Office for archaeological, historical and paleontological resources. There were no historical or archaeological sites identified during the on-site inspection.
11. AESTHETICS: Is the project on a prominent topographic feature? Will it be visible from populated or scenic areas? Will there be excessive noise or light?	No Action Alternative: There would be no impacts that would occur to the aesthetic values associated with the State land under this alternative. Action Alternative: The project site is located in a rural area and is visible to the general public from a county road. The project will have no impacts to the aesthetic values associated with the State land involved with this project or other surrounding lands. The aesthetic values of this area for the most part are dryland agriculture producing small grain and pulse crops. There are scattered tame grass/native rangelands in the vicinity of the project site.
12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY: Will the project use resources that are limited in the area? Are there other activities nearby that will affect the project?	No Action Alternative: There will be no demands on environmental resources of land, water, air or energy occurring under this alternative. Action Alternative: The project will place no demands on environmental resources of land, water, air or energy. The nearby activities occurring on surrounding lands are the tillage of dryland agriculture acreage for the production of small grain and pulse crops. There are some scattered areas where livestock grazing occurs.
13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA: Are there other studies, plans or projects on this tract?	No Action Alternative: Under this alternative there would be no changes to existing plans, studies or projects that the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation may have occurring on the State land. Action Alternative: The breaking of the tame grass/alfalfa vegetation will not impact other projects or plans that the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation may have occurring on this tract of State land.

II. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	

III. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION	
RESOURCE	POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES
14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY: Will this project add to health and safety risks in the area?	No Action Alternative: No human health or safety risks would occur under this alterative. Action Alternative: The breaking of tame grass/alfalfa vegetation for dryland small grain or pulse crop production has minimal human health or safety risks.
15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION: Will the project add to or alter these activities?	No Action Alternative: Under this alternative there will be no changes to current agriculture activities. Action Alternative: The project will enhance the surface lessee Curt Flakne's ability to produce small grain and pulse crops on his State land lease. The production of dryland small grain and pulse crops will also enhance the revenue generated for the School Trust.
16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT: Will the project create, move or eliminate jobs? If so, estimated number.	No Action Alternative; There will be no impacts to quantity and distribution of employment. Action Alternative: The project will not impact the quantity and distribution of employment. The land breaking will be accomplished by the surface lessee or his designated hired labor force.
17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES: Will the project create or eliminate tax revenue?	No Action Alternative: No local and state tax base and tax revenues would be impacted under this alternative. Action Alternative: The project will have no impacts on the local or state tax base.
18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES: Will substantial traffic be added to existing roads? Will other services (fire protection, police, schools, etc) be needed?	No Action Alternative: Under this alternative there will be no demands for government services. Action Alternative: The project will place no demands for government services.
19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS: Are there State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, etc. zoning or management plans in effect?	No Action Alternative: No impacts would occur to the locally adopted environmental plans or goals under this alternative. Action Alternative; The project will not impact locally adopted environmental plans and goals. The United States Department of Agriculture agencies (Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources and Conservation Service) will review this land breaking request by Curt Flakne. The writer of this document envisions that they will approve of the land breaking request with

	there specific management plan of operation.
20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES: Are wilderness or recreational areas nearby or accessed through this tract? Is there recreational potential within the tract?	No Action Alternative: No impacts would occur to access and quality or recreation associated with the State land under this alternative. Action Alternative: The project area has some recreational values, upland bird hunting, mule deer and whitetail deer hunting in its current status. The land breaking project will have impacts to the hunting recreational values associated with this tract of state land. There will be no impacts to recreational values on other bordering lands.
21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING: Will the project add to the population and require additional housing?	No Action Alternative; No impacts will occur to density and distribution of population and housing under this alternative. Action Alternative: The project will not impact the density and distribution of the population and housing on this rural area.
22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES: Is some disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities possible?	No Action Alternative; No impacts will occur to native or traditional lifestyles or communities under this alternative. Action Alternative: The project will not impact the social structures of the local communities.
23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY: Will the action cause a shift in some unique quality of the area?	No Action Alternative: No impacts will occur to the cultural uniqueness and diversity under this alternative. Action Alternative: The project will not impact the cultural uniqueness and diversity of the State land.
24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:	No Action Alternative: Under this alternative there will be no social or economic impacts that would occur Action Alternative: The cumulative affects of this project provides economic benefit to Curt Flakne and the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation School Trust Fund. The dryland agriculture acreage on the State land will increase Curt Flakne's annual revenue from his State land lease holdings. The Department of Natural Resources will see additional revenue generated from this tract of State land for the School Trust.

EA Checklist Prepared By: \S\
Date:

Randy Dirkson Land Use Specialist

IV. FINDING	
25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:	Action Alternative
26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:	No significant impacts are anticipated.
27. Need for Further Environmental Analysis: [ ] EIS [ ] More Detailed EA [X] No Further Analysis	

EA Checklist Approved By: Matthew Poole (Name) Glasgow Unit Manager (Title)

s/Matthew Poole\s (Signature) Date: January 24, 2014